



REACH

Resilience, Ethnicity, and AdolesCent Mental Health



Centre for
Society and
Mental Health



Young People, Covid-19, and Mental Health: The REACH Covid-19 Study (Part 1) Executive Summary of Reports 1 - 3

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For more information:

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REACH (Resilience, Ethnicity, and AdolesCent Mental Health) is an ongoing cohort study of adolescent mental health in two inner-city London boroughs, Southwark and Lambeth.

Twelve state-funded secondary schools in Southwark and Lambeth were invited to participate in REACH in 2015-2016, selected to be representative of mainstream secondary schools within the two boroughs, based on: (i) the proportion of students eligible for free school meals and (ii) the proportion of students from minority ethnic groups.

All students in school years 7 to 9 (n, 4,945) were invited to participate at baseline, creating three cohorts – age 11-12 (Cohort 1; school year 7), 12-13 (Cohort 2; school year 8), and 13-14 (Cohort 3; school year 9). Each cohort completed questionnaires annually for three years. The fourth year of data collection – the Time 4 (T4) Covid-19 wave – is currently underway, and aims to track the mental health of adolescents, who have previously taken part in the REACH study, throughout the Covid-19 pandemic.

The analyses presented in these reports were conducted on the first 1,074 students who participated between when the survey link was opened (in May 2020) and the start of the new academic year (and UK schools reopening) in September 2020.

Mental health was assessed using the widely used and validated self-report Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) for 11 to 17-year-olds, which measures emotional and behavioural problems during the previous 6 months. We sought to examine variations

in impacts on mental health by social and ethnic group, by pre-existing risks (e.g., prior mental health problems), and by the direct consequences of Covid-19, social restrictions, and school closures.

Summary of findings

In the initial phase of the Covid-19 pandemic (between May 2020 and August 2020), we found:

1. Concerns, Worries, and Positives (Report 1)

Overall, social impacts – and related worries and perceived positives – were mixed. For some, home circumstances, relationships, and routines were profoundly disrupted, especially those in low-income households and in minority ethnic groups. For others, there were positive changes.

- Almost all reported a mix of concerns and positives related to social restrictions and school closures, with over 50% reporting 4 or more (n 583, 53.1%) concerns and 88% reporting 4 or more (n 946) positive impacts.
- The most frequently reported concerns were, broadly, related to education: half the sample (50%) were concerned about their exams/grades, 38% of the sample were worried about falling behind with schoolwork, and were 29% concerned about getting into college / sixth form / university.

2. Impacts on Mental Health (Report 2)

- Against a background of high pre-pandemic levels of mental distress, there was no evidence of an overall increase in the prevalence of mental health problems – or in mean SDQ scores – pre- to mid-pandemic during the first lockdown period (T4).
- There was a slight improvement in

externalising scores on the SDQ from pre- to mid-pandemic in the overall sample.

- There were small variations in changes in mental distress by social group. For example, we found a modest increase in distress, mostly in internalising scores, among girls, such that pre-pandemic disparities between girls and boys widened. By contrast, we found evidence of a decrease in externalising scores among some ethnic groups (e.g., Black Caribbean) and those in low-income households.

3. Impacts on Mental Health by pre- and mid-pandemic risks (Report 3)

- We found notable variations in distress by social and economic consequences of the pandemic. The strongest evidence for increases in mental distress were among those living in challenging circumstances, those most directly affected by social restrictions (e.g., worse family relationships, isolation, unstable routines), and those who expressed multiple concerns related to impacts of the pandemic.

Read the article

These reports accompany the journal article, currently in press: Knowles G, Gayer-Anderson C, Turner A, Dorn, L, Lam J, Davis S, Blakey R, Lowis K, Schools Working Group; Young Persons Advisory Group; Pinfold V, Creary N, Dyer J, Hatch SL, Ploubidis G, Bhui K, Harding S, Morgan C. (In Press) Covid-19, social restrictions, and mental distress among young people: a UK longitudinal, population-based study. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*.



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